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## Why are you an environmental educator?

The annual conference of the *North American Association for Environmental Education* is the gathering for people involved in the environmental education. Those attending include school and college teachers, researchers and research students, folk from NGO and business, and from national, regional and local government agencies. It's a meeting at which thinking about issues of society, environment and learning goes on from a wide range of perspectives. The next meeting is in Baltimore: October 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup>.

Some of those who attend are primarily interested in studying natural processes in order to understand them. Others see nature as a metaphor for a preferred social order, which may be 'competitive' or 'co-operative' according to taste or worldview. This Table is based on observations we made at NAAEE conferences over a number of years [**Note 1**]. It sets out nine *categories of interest* which capture the different focuses and objectives of those who espouse and promote what we called environmental learning [**Note 2**].

Categories of Interest ...	Focus & outcomes	Exemplified by ...
1. those <b>interested in sharing the joy and fulfilment derived from nature</b> , in order to bring about significant life-enhancing and life-changing experience for learners	<b>Nature</b> <i>values &amp; feelings</i>	<b>non-formal educators</b> and <b>interpreters</b> seeking attitudinal and/or value change; possibly seeking to introduce and extend particular philosophies of living
2. those <b>interested in the study of the processes of nature</b> in order to understand, or to teach about them	<b>Nature</b> <i>understanding</i>	<b>teachers</b> of ecology, (physical) geography, the earth sciences and rural studies; <b>researchers</b> in these (and other) areas
3. those <b>using nature as an heuristic</b> to foster the development of knowledge, understanding, skills and character which, although situated, are transferable to other contexts and through time	<b>Nature</b> <i>skills</i>	<b>teachers, environmental interpreters</b> and <b>field studies officers</b> seeking to develop students' cognitive/conative/affective/psychomotor skills related to environmental work
4. those <b>using the natural and/or built environments as heuristics</b> to achieve conservation and/or sustainability goals	<b>Conservation</b> <i>understanding</i>	<b>conservation/heritage scientists</b> (and others) working for government or NGOs bringing communication and education strategies to bear on conservation and sustainability issues
5. those <b>advocating/promoting individual behaviour changes</b> in order to achieve conservation/sustainability goals	<b>Conservation</b> <i>behaviours</i>	<b>environmental activists</b> and <b>teachers</b> who have clear views on what the problems are, and on their solutions
6. those <b>advocating/promoting particular modes of social change</b> in order to achieve environmental/conservation/sustainability goals	<b>Social Change</b> <i>Social justice</i>	<b>environmental activists</b> and <b>teachers</b> with clear views on the form of social organisation needed to achieve sustainability
7. those <b>using environmental, conservation and/or sustainability issues as contexts</b> for the development of skills and knowledge related to the exercise of democratic social change	<b>Social Change</b> <i>democratic citizenship skills</i>	<b>teachers</b> and others interested in helping (young) people acquire democratic and citizenship skills which will enable them to participate in open-ended social change relating to human-environment relationships
8. those <b>promoting nature as a metaphor for a preferred social order</b> – which may be 'co-operative' or 'competitive', according to worldview	<b>Social Change</b> <i>values</i>	<b>sociobiologists, deep-ecologists, social Darwinists, Gaianists</b> who engage in communication and informal education in relation to the relationship between humans and nature
9. those <b>interested in the study of</b>	<b>Learning</b>	<b>educational researchers</b> interested in

**environmental learning** (and  
environmental education) itself

*learning about  
learning*

various aspects of learning and teaching  
related to environmental and  
sustainability issues

Disposition towards sustainability varies across the categories. Many environmental educators welcome a focus on sustainable development because it provides the opportunity to raise issues of social justice, while others use it strategically to promote particular social change. Of course, any such categorisation has to be a simplification as these categories are not necessarily fully discrete, and an individual might be involved in two or more of them, but it does allow us to consider how those interested in environmental learning can have widely differing assumptions about both purpose and process.

For example:

- From #1 to #8, interest in nature, *per se*, decreases markedly, along with a shift from a realist view of nature to a metaphorical one. There is also a shift from interest in the individual learner to the social context.
- From #3 to #7 the environment (natural and otherwise) is viewed mainly as a means of exploring issues and achieving particular goals.
- #8 sees the natural world as providing a coherent and liveable philosophy that explains our social and ecological obligations. Some of those in this category may have very little else in common.

We thought that all the perspectives represented by these categories of interest had something useful to contribute to learning about the human condition and our relationship with nature under conditions of complexity, uncertainty, risk and necessity, but that no one perspective provided the full picture. Thus, we all can focus on our own particular priorities and or responsibilities as environmental educators, knowing that doing so doesn't render other perspectives illegitimate; what is crucial, is that learners are helped to see connections across these different approaches.

So, what are your categories of interest? Where do you stand? Does the Table help you see what you do in relation to what others contribute?

And is there anything we have missed?

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Stephen Gough and William Scott  
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### **Notes**

1. This is based on: Scott W & Gough S (2003) Using the environment as a stimulus to learning: exploring categories of interest; *Environmental Communicator* 33(1) 8. This was also discussed in our book: Scott W & Gough S (2003) *Sustainable development and learning: framing the issues*; London/New York: RoutledgeFalmer

2. Environmental learning is defined purposefully broadly here as *learning which accrues or is derived from an engagement with the environment or environmental ideas*.